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## The back on track alternative provision pilots: Final report

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### Introduction

This report sets out the findings from research into the Back on Track alternative provision pilots. These projects stemmed from a commitment in the 2008 White Paper, *Back on Track: A strategy for modernising alternative provision for young people* (DCSF, 2008), to transform the quality of alternative education for those who are excluded from, or who for some other reason are unable to attend school. As part of the Back on Track agenda, £26.5 million was allocated to fund 12 innovative pilot projects to develop best practice and encourage greater diversity in alternative provision. The pilot programme commenced in April 2009 and funding, the majority of which was ringfenced for capital development, ceased in April 2011. During this time, significant economic and political changes occurred that impacted on the contexts in which the pilots operated.

### Scope of the research

The overarching aim of this research was to develop insights from the 12 specifically funded projects as part of the Back on Track pilot programme to investigate what can work in alternative provision, how and for whom, in order to advance understandings and inform future policy and practice. To achieve this, the study focused on developing knowledge through the varying experiences of the Back on Track pilots in relation to:

- the structure, content and operation of the alternative provision pilot projects
- the key ingredients of delivery that lead to effective alternative provision in the pilot projects
- the outcomes, impacts and achievements of the alternative provision pilot projects.

### Methodology

- The research was commissioned by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (now the Department for Education) and carried out by a team at the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER).
- The report's findings are based on qualitative information derived from case-study visits carried out between autumn 2009 and spring 2012 involving individual, face-to-face, group and telephone interviews with 129 pilot project staff (operational and strategic level); 41 school/pupil referral unit (PRU) staff; 58 local authority staff (operational and strategic); 86 young people; 21 parents/carers; and 19 others (including other service providers and partners).

## Conclusions

- The Back on Track pilot programme encompassed a variety of approaches to improving alternative provision involving PRUs, private providers, third sector providers, social enterprises, local authorities, schools and strategic partnerships. Pilots operated along a continuum with some working directly with a small, tightly defined group of learners, some working with broader groups of young people across one or more settings, whilst others had local authority-wide and strategic goals.
- Capital investment through Back on Track has led to the majority of pilots operating in, and through, a wide range of newly built and refurbished settings including PRUs, schools, youth centres, farms, retail and catering establishments, college, training and workplace environments.
- Numerous combinations of academic, vocational, therapeutic, social, emotional, personal and behavioural curriculum content and activities have been delivered to young people with a range of multiple and complex needs in part-time temporary and time-limited contexts as well as permanent, full-time comprehensive provision.
- There are variations in the extent to which the different projects have 'piloted' new and innovative approaches to alternative provision as opposed to continuing and expanding existing forms and formats of provision. There are also varying degrees of success in terms of delivering stated outcomes, and varied experiences in relation to sustainability and legacy.
- There is considerable variation in the timeframes required to embed the necessary developments and changes that may underpin future outcomes and achievements, many of which were not fully observed within the duration of this research.
- A combination of accountability and monitoring approaches and systems is required to effectively ensure pilots are on track to meet their aims and secure appropriate outcomes for young people. Accountability systems used by pilots range from ongoing, often informal processes within pilots to more formal external inspections and assessments. Monitoring approaches include tracking individual young people's progress, provision-level assessments of achievement, and monitoring of the performance of partners and providers by local authorities and other commissioners of alternative provision.
- Pilot-specific outcomes and achievements are inevitably varied and not directly comparable within and across the pilot programme. However, all pilots have demonstrated local improvements in providing a wide range of young people with increased access to meaningful and appropriate learning activities and environments.

## Achievements for young people

- Across the pilot programme, there is evidence of significant improvements in the attendance and punctuality of many young people relative to previous levels of attendance at school or at other forms of provision, often reflecting attitudinal changes in relation to education and learning.
- Young people have secured a wide range of learning outcomes and achievements reflecting their individual circumstances and situations. GCSEs and equivalents as well as a range of vocationally-orientated accreditation have been secured, although generally still below levels for young people accessing mainstream education. Notwithstanding the actual level of academic outcomes generated, many young people have experienced positive changes in their outlooks towards education and their ability to achieve.
- Key enhancements evident in young people's personal, social and emotional development while attending the pilot projects include: increased contentment and the emergence of more positive outlooks; increased self-confidence and self-esteem; the development of a greater sense of responsibility and maturity and other behavioural improvements. Changes have also been observed in many of the young people attending the pilots manifest in their interactions with others, including their improved capacity to communicate effectively and appropriately with a wide range of people, including parents/carers, peers, alternative provision staff, school staff and adults in general.

- Young people have experienced a range of positive post-pilot progressions, including re-integration to mainstream school, progression to further education and training and employment. However, retention at subsequent destinations in some cases remains an area for development and across the pilots, not all young people secured positive destinations.

## Issues and challenges

- A key challenge for many pilots involved meeting the immediate critical social, emotional and behavioural needs of young people as a basis for pursuing the core educational-orientated aims of the pilot. Where such needs have been successfully met, an ongoing issue for pilots relates to the difficulties in ensuring that these gains can be effectively transferred and sustained if, and when, young people re-integrate back into mainstream school settings or progress to other destinations.
- Pilots faced difficulties associated with the availability, consistency and quality of information underpinning the referral process. Referrals based on inadequate information could lead to inappropriate matching of young people and provision. The ability of some pilots to successfully offer appropriate levels and types of intervention and support for young people with SEN and significant behavioural issues varied, with some vocationally-orientated alternative educational projects, for example, experiencing particular difficulties.
- Deteriorating economic conditions posed significant difficulties for some pilots, either directly through the lack of extended funding opportunities, or indirectly through changing local spending priorities. Of critical importance was the perceived reduction in the commissioning of alternative provision by schools and local authorities.

## Key facilitating factors

- Effective strategic positioning of the pilots was essential in ensuring their integration into wider structures of local alternative and mainstream provision.
- Effective dialogue, communication and coordinated working alongside schools, the local authority and local FE establishments underpinned pilots' roles and reputations in their localities.
- Pilots' ability to deliver appropriate content and activities to young people entails the development and maintenance of links with families and communities. In one pilot, high-profile open days inviting local communities into the project have been especially valuable as a means of highlighting the quality and relevance of the provision on offer and countering negative perceptions and stereotypes of alternative provision and the young people who attend.
- There is evidence from across the pilots that effectiveness stems from providing learning activities and content that are based on considerations of the particular needs and circumstances of individual young people. However, the extent to which alternative provision packages can be personalised is influenced, to varying degrees, by the parameters and structures in which the pilots operate.
- Pilots also demonstrate increasing commitment to delivering high-quality academic curriculum content as a means of supporting pupils' reintegration to mainstream school as well as equipping them for post-16 progressions. Central to effective curriculum construction and delivery is the need to maintain high expectations and aspirations for and of young people whilst maximising opportunities for success.
- The individual and collective characteristics, qualities and approaches of the staff working in the Back on Track pilots were critical drivers of their success in generating positive outcomes for young people. Specific factors relate to the importance of staff having a history of, or newly discovered talents and affinities for working with hard-to-reach students, underpinning a commitment to building relationships.
- Effective delivery of alternative provision through the Back on Track pilots was also supported through appropriate leadership approaches and the impact of specific personalities. Key personnel were essential in promoting the philosophy and vision of the pilots, and promoting their value and that of alternative provision in general.

## Recommendations

- There should be enhanced efforts to ensure that alternative provision, in its many varied forms is appropriately conceptualised, understood and promoted. There is a need to broaden understandings of the scope and value of alternative provision, in terms of what it constitutes, how it operates and is delivered, and the extent and nature of the contributions it can make to the lives and future life chances of young people.
- The value and effectiveness of pursuing personalised approaches to alternative provision need to be recognised and supported, especially in the commissioning process. Consideration should be given to tensions between the role of alternative provision in meeting the hierarchy of needs of individual young people through personalised approaches, and the imperatives to generate outcomes centred on academic-related performance targets.
- Efforts need to be made to ensure alternative provision is integrated into wider local systems and structures of service delivery. The effectiveness of alternative provision is enhanced when it is perceived and commissioned as an essential component of a continuum of local provision and support, with coordinated routes in and out, to facilitate appropriate positive transitions for young people.
- The timescales in which alternative provision operates, and its impacts and outcomes considered, need to be extended.
- The measurement and assessment of the impacts, outcomes and achievements of alternative provision need further consideration and development. There remains a critical need to develop meaningful achievable outcome measures that, whilst taking into account the variations and differences in circumstances of young people and the aims/remit of the provision, can deliver valuable assessments of their capacity to effect positive change. There is a need for the development of an appropriate set of metrics that can be successfully and consistently applied to accurately facilitate comparable assessment of the progress and impacts generated by and through the whole range of alternative provision.

## Reference

Department for Children, Schools and Families (2008). *Back on Track: a Strategy for Modernising Alternative Provision for Young People*. London: DCSF [online]. Available: <http://publications.dcsf.gov.uk/eOrderingDownload/CM-7410.pdf> [30 March, 2012].

## Additional Information

The full report can be accessed at <http://www.education.gov.uk/publications/>  
Further information about this research can be obtained from  
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This research report was commissioned before the new UK Government took office on 11 May 2010. As a result the content may not reflect current Government policy and may make reference to the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) which has now been replaced by the Department for Education (DFE).

The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Education.